

FEMA Celebrates a “Year of Firsts” During National Native American Heritage Month, Reinforces Commitment to Supporting Tribal Nations

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WASHINGTON -- November marks National Native American Heritage Month, an opportunity for every person in the nation to reflect on our shared nation's history and honor the Tribal Nations and tribal citizens who called this land home long before the United States became a country.

This National Native American Heritage Month, FEMA is celebrating a “year of firsts,” with the appointment of the agency's first-ever National Tribal Affairs Advocate, the release of the agency's first-ever National Tribal Strategy, the first National Advisory Council meeting in Indian Country and the first tribal citizen to hold the position of council chair in FEMA history.

At FEMA, Tribal Nations and tribal citizens are daily partners in emergency management and disaster resiliency. Tribal Nations are often the first and sometimes only responders to disasters that occur in Indian Country. The agency celebrates and honors the Nation-to-Nation relationships between FEMA and the 574 federally recognized Tribal Nations across the country.

“As we reflect on the achievements, contributions, sacrifices, cultures and traditions of Tribal Nations and tribal citizens -- past and present -- we are also looking to the future,” said FEMA's National Tribal Affairs Advocate, Ms. Kelbie Kennedy. “We are committed to ensuring that FEMA improves our coordination with, and support of, all Tribal Nations across the country. When Tribal Nations have the support and resources they need, everyone in Indian Country, both Native and Non-Native, become safer.”

To ensure FEMA continues to advance its commitments to align the agency's capabilities to the needs of Tribal Nations, FEMA has appointed the first tribal



affairs political appointee in both FEMA and Department of Homeland Security history. Ms. Kelbie Kennedy, a citizen of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma who was born and raised in her Nation's reservation in Southeastern Oklahoma, joined FEMA in October of this year.

As the first FEMA National Tribal Affairs Advocate, Ms. Kennedy advises the FEMA Administrator and the agency on all matters pertaining to tribal affairs, ensures that Tribal Nations and tribal citizen needs are front of mind for FEMA and aims to ensure the agency lives up to its treaty and trust responsibilities to all Tribal Nations.

Last week, FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell attended the [National Advisory Council](#) year-end meeting hosted by the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, making it the first-ever council meeting held in Indian Country. During the meeting, the council held focused discussions on improving Nation-to-Nation relationships and supporting tribal sovereignty. At the end of the meeting, the Administrator appointed Jeff Hansen, Director of Community Protection for the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, as the National Advisory Council chair. Mr. Hansen is the first tribal citizen to hold the position of council chair in FEMA history.

Earlier this year, the agency also released the first-ever [2022-2026 FEMA National Tribal Strategy](#) to focus engagement and collaboration on the unique needs of sovereign tribal nations. The strategy is designed to foster stronger collaboration and information sharing between FEMA and Tribal Nations by providing the agency with a roadmap to refine and elaborate on major strategic goals and objectives we are working to achieve. Key issue areas were added to address requests from tribal leaders and tribal emergency managers, including tribal-specific technical assistance and tailored resources to support tribal emergency management programs.

To further address the unique needs and considerations of Tribal Nations, FEMA is also creating a Tribal Cybersecurity Grants Program, led by FEMA in coordination with the Department of Homeland Security and the Cybersecurity Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA). The new grants will address cybersecurity risks and threats to information systems owned or operated by, or on behalf of, Tribal Nations. Earlier this year FEMA consulted with Tribal Nations per its Federal trust and treaty responsibilities and has improved the program as a result. Tribal leaders provided important input during the tribal consultation that will significantly improve the final grant program. Detailed information about the tribal cybersecurity



program will be available soon.



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